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THE GREEK PAPYRI AND THE NEW TESTAMENT

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II

From the general considerations of the preceding paper it is necessary now to pass to examine somewhat more in detail the significance of the Greek papyri for the New Testament student. And we may begin at once by noticing that they have added to his materials a number of new texts, many of them of great importance. Among these we have to reckon certain fragmentary texts of the New Testament books themselves, including a third-century manuscript of the genealogical section of Matt., chap. 1, parts of John, chaps. 1 and 20, of the same date, and about one-third of the Epistle to the Hebrews, going back to the first half, perhaps even to the first quarter, of the fourth century. Any examination of these texts lies, of course, wholly outside our present purpose, but in the main they are found to agree with the two great codices, **A**, **B**, and may be taken therefore as comprising what we are accustomed to regard as the Westcott-Hort type of text.

More novel is the recovery of certain so-called *Logia* or Sayings of Jesus. The first collection of these goes back as far as 1897, when, in excavating at Oxyrhynchus, Drs. Grenfell and Hunt found among a number of other Greek papyri a single leaf of a papyrus book containing eight Sayings ascribed to Jesus. Several of these bear a close resemblance to passages in the canonical gospels, but others were previously unknown, such as the second, "Jesus saith, Except ye fast to the world, ye shall in no wise find the kingdom of God; and except ye make the sabbath a real sabbath, ye shall not see the Father;" or the variously interpreted fifth, "Jesus saith, Wherever there are (two), they are not without God, and wherever there is one alone, I say, I am with him. Raise the stone, and there thou shalt find me; cleave the wood, and there am I."

Five years later, the same explorers, to whose labors in the field

of papyrology it is impossible to pay too high a tribute, recovered, again at Oxyrhynchus, five new Sayings, written on the back of a survey-list of various pieces of land. As in the case of the earlier find, Drs. Grenfell and Hunt considered that the actual writing of these could not be dated later than the third century, while the Sayings themselves clearly went back to a much earlier origin. The third and the fifth must suffice to give an idea of their general character:

Jesus saith, A man shall not hesitate to inquire boldly about the seasons, prating of the place of glory. But ye shall hold your peace; for many that are first shall be last, and the last first, and few shall find it.

His disciples inquire of him and say, How are we to fast? and how are we to pray? and how are we to give alms? and of such duties what are we to observe? Jesus saith, See that ye lose not your reward. Do nothing save the things that belong to the truth, for if ye do these, ye shall know a hidden mystery. I say unto you, Blessed is the man who¹

It is again impossible to attempt here any discussion of the many and interesting questions that the discovery of these remarkable Sayings has raised. It is enough to say that while certain of them undoubtedly betray traces of the sub-apostolic environment out of which they immediately sprang, there is still good reason for believing that they contain a distinct residuum of our Lord's teaching, and from this point of view may be taken as preserving for us some of the "many other things" not recorded in the gospels which, as St. John reminds us, Jesus said and did (John 21:25).

Along with the *Logia* there may also be mentioned the apocryphal writings and fragments of uncanonical gospels, which we owe to the new finds; but as the most important of these are written not on papyrus, but on vellum, they hardly come under our immediate subject, and we may pass rather to the *indirect* aid afforded by the papyri in the interpretation of the New Testament.

Three points here demand attention:

i. In the matter of *language*, the papyri afford abundant proof that the so-called "peculiarities" of the Greek of the New Testament are due not to "Biblical Greek" or "language of the Holy

¹ These two collections of Sayings will be found in the *Oxyrhynchus Papyri* I, 1 ff. and IV, 1 ff. They have also been issued as separate publications by the Graeco-Roman branch of the Egypt Exploration Fund.

Ghost," but rather to the fact that their writers largely availed themselves of the ordinary, colloquial tongue, the *Kouṇí*, of their day.

This is not to say, of course, that in their case we are wholly to disregard the influence of translation-Greek with the consequent occurrence of undoubted Hebraisms both in language and in grammar.² Nor again must we lose sight of the fact that the sacred writers deepened and enriched the significance of many everyday words and employed them in altogether new connotations. At the same time it will not be denied that the best way to get these new connotations is to start from the old, and to trace, as we are now enabled to do, the steps by which words were raised from their original popular and secular meanings to the more metaphorical and spiritual usage with which the sacred writers have made us familiar. One or two examples will make this clear.

In a very illiterate letter of the second century before Christ the writer speaks of himself as *βαπτιζόμεθα* in a context which seems clearly to imply that he can only mean "flooded," "overwhelmed," with calamities.³ But if so, how strikingly this vernacular usage illustrates the solemn use which our Lord makes of the same figure when he describes his Passion as a "baptism." Or, to take a somewhat kindred example suggested by the other great sacrament, more than one letter that has come down to us contains an invitation to be present "at the table of the lord Sarapis" (*εἰς κλείνη τοῦ κυρίου Σαράπιδος*).⁴ Without seeking to press the analogy too far, we can at least understand how the common phrase would prepare St. Paul's readers for the new truths associated with his call to be partakers "of the table of the Lord" (*τραπέζης κυρίου*). The very title "Lord," in which the apostle sums up his conception of the exalted and ever-present Lord, is in itself another case in point.

² A too great tendency to minimize these last is probably the most pertinent criticism that can be directed against Professor J. H. Moulton's *Prolegomena to A Grammar of New Testament Greek* (3d ed., 1908), a book that is as useful to the papyrologist as it is indispensable to the student of the Greek New Testament.

³ *Paris Papyri*, No. 47, l. 13 (= Witkowski, *Ep. Gr. Priv.*, p. 64).

⁴ E. g., *Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, III, 260, No. 523: Ἐρωτᾷ σε Ἀντώνιος Πτολεμαῖος διπνῆσαι παρ' αὐτῷ εἰς κλείνη τοῦ κυρίου Σαράπιδος, ἐν τοῖς κλαωδίον Σαραπίων. "Antonius, son of Ptolemaeus, invites you to dine with him at the table of the lord Sarapis in the house of Claudius Sarapion." Notice the confirmation afforded by these last words of the R. V. rendering of Luke 2:49.

For if it gives us somewhat of a shock at first to find the same title freely bestowed in the papyri even to the most worthless of the Roman emperors, we may perhaps see in the peculiar emphasis which St. Paul lays upon it a “tacit protest,” as Professor Deissmann puts it, against its application to other “lords,” and the desire to recover it to its true use.⁵ In a less degree the same deepening of a familiar word appears in the New Testament description of the Lord’s return as a *parousia*. Many examples can now be cited to show that the word had come to be used as a kind of *terminus technicus* to describe a *state* or *royal* visit, and as such it readily lent itself to denote what was both a *return* and a *presence* of the glorified Lord.⁶

It is tempting to go on in this line, but one other example must suffice, this time of a more general character. Among the papyri preserved at Florence there is an edict in which the parents of a youth who has been living riotously (*ἀσωτευόμενος*; cf. Luke 15:13) give notice that they will no longer be responsible for his debts, and request that this fact be “publicly proclaimed.”⁷ The verb is *προγραφῆναι*, at once recalling the occurrence of the same word in Gal. 3:1, where Bishop Lightfoot renders, “before whose eyes Jesus Christ was placarded, publicly announced as a magisterial edict or proclamation (*προεγράφη*), crucified.”

2. The *form*, again, which the New Testament writers so frequently adopted for the conveyance of religious truth is reflected in the clearest manner in the private letters that have been rescued from the sands of Egypt. It may seem strange at first sight to those who have had no previous acquaintance with the subject, that those simple and artless communications, the mere flotsam and jetsam of a long-past civilization, should for a moment be put in evidence alongside the epistles of St. Paul. But even if they do nothing else, they prove how “popular” rather than “literary” in origin, those epistles really are,⁸ and how constantly the apostle adapts the current epistolary phrases of his time to his special purposes.

⁵ *New Light on the New Testament*, p. 81.

⁶ See, e. g., *Tebtunis Papyri*, I, 155, No. 48 (ii: B. C.), an account of an extra levy of wheat incurred *πρὸς τὴν τοῦ βασιλέως παρονταν*, and the other examples in my commentary on *Thessalonians*, pp. 145 f.

⁷ *Papyri Fiorentini*, I, 188 ff., No. 99.

⁸ The distinction holds good, even if we cannot go all the way with Deissmann (*Bible Studies*, pp. 3 ff.) in pronouncing all the Pauline writings “letters” rather

In proof of this it will be sufficient to quote without further comment three specimens of these letters.

The first is from Oxyrhynchus, of date 25 A.D., and has the additional advantage of recalling the "epistles of commendation" to which St. Paul refers in II Cor. 3:1.

Theon to his most esteemed Tyrannus heartiest greetings. Heraclides, the bearer of this letter to you, is my brother. Therefore I beg you with all my power to hold him as recommended to you. I have also asked Hermias your brother to communicate with you in writing regarding this. You will do me the greatest favor if Heraclides gains your notice. But above all I pray that you may be in unbroken health and prosperity. Good-bye.⁹

The second also belongs to the first century after Christ, and may therefore be regarded as practically contemporary with the New Testament writings. In it a certain Procleius writes asking that certain drugs should be sent to him at Alexandria, and warns his correspondent that they must be of good quality.

Procleius to his dearest Pecusis greeting. Be so good as to sell at your own risk good quality of those drugs of which my friend Sotas says that he has need, so that he may bring them down for me to Alexandria. For if you do otherwise, and give him rotten stuff, which will not pass muster in Alexandria, understand that you will have to settle with me with regard to the expenses. Greet all your household. Good-bye.¹⁰

The third strikes a deeper note. It is a letter from a mother to her children, and offers striking resemblances to a Pauline writing both in the prayer with which it opens, and its numerous closing greetings. It belongs to the end of the second, or the beginning of the third century of our era.

Sarapis to her children Ptolemaeus and Apolinaria and Ptolemaeus heartiest greetings.

Above all I pray that you may be in health which is more important to me than anything else. I make obeisance for you to the lord Sarapis, and pray to receive you in good health, (such as) I pray you have attained. I was glad on receiving the letters to learn that you had come safely through. Greet Ammonous with her children and husband, and all who love thee. Cyrilla greets you, and

than "epistles." This may be true of the short epistle to Philemon which is little more than a private note, but surely such an epistle as the Epistle to the Romans stands on a different footing, and if only by the character of its contents is to be widely differentiated from the unstudied expression of personal feeling that we associate with the idea of a true "letter."

⁹ *Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, II, 292, No. 292.

¹⁰ *British Museum Papyri*, II, 252.

her daughter Hermias, Hermanubis the nurse, Athenais the governess, Cyrilla, Casia, . . . all who are here. In answer to my inquiry as to what you are doing, write me, for you know that as often as I receive letters regarding you, I rejoice in your well-being. I pray that you may prosper.¹¹

3. These three letters will also serve to illustrate our last point, and that is the help which the papyri afford in enabling us to picture the *general environment*, social and religious, of the earliest followers of Christianity. These followers belonged for the most part, though by no means exclusively, to the poorer classes of the population, whom the ordinary historian of the period did not think it worth his while to notice.¹² But now, by means of their own letters and petitions, wills and contracts, we can see them in all the varied relationships of their everyday life and thought. The oppressed appeal to the judge for protection, creditors execute summary justice upon their debtors, the prodigal son stands before us in the flesh, while the mourners "sorrowing as those who have no hope," and the perplexed and diseased seeking help in dreams and enchantments, show how deep and real were the needs of those to whom the gospel was first preached.

There may be a danger at present, in view of the unusual and romantic character of their discoveries, to exaggerate the importance of the papyri in these and similar directions. But there can be no doubt as to the richness of the field which they present to the student alike of religion and of life. And one main object of these fragmentary papers will be accomplished if they succeed in any measure in directing attention to the work that has already been done in the papyri, and, even more perhaps, to the work that still remains to be done.

¹¹ *Berl. Gr. Urk.*, I, 326, No. 332.

¹² Professor Deissmann in his *Licht vom Osten* (p. 209) strikingly recalls the *Prosopographia Imperii Romani*, which catalogues 8,644 men and women of note during the first three centuries, but omits of set purpose "hominum plebeiorum infinitam illam turbam"—Jesus and Paul among them! The whole of Dr. Deissmann's book, of which an English translation is promised under the somewhat misleading title *Light from Anatolia*, is a perfect mine of information and illustration on the points raised by these papers.